

# THE BLACK TENTS

A PLAY

*of life among the Bedouins in Syria*

By FLORENCE CRANNELL MEANS

*Price, Twenty-five Cents*

*Printed for the Woman's Foreign Missionary  
Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church*

*by*

FRIENDSHIP PRESS

150 FIFTH AVENUE

NEW YORK

## CHARACTERS

IBRAHIM (Ib-ra-heem') }  
JIDRY } Bedouin boys of Junior age

YAKOB (Yah-ko-be'), younger brother of Ibrahim

ZARISEH (Za-ree-sa), Junior-age girl, sister of Ibrahim  
and Yakob

SADA, little sister of Ibrahim, Yakob, and Zariseh (a very  
small girl if possible)

SYRIAN GIRL

SYRIAN BOY

GREEK GIRLS and BOYS }  
RUSSIAN GIRLS and BOYS } as many as desired for  
SYRIAN GIRLS and BOYS } a picturesque effect

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## Costumes, Stage Setting, and Accessories

The Bedouin boys and girls should wear long, loose robes reaching almost to the ankle and held in rather tightly around the waist with a girdle of cloth; the sleeves of the robes are long and not very loose. The boys may wear small white rough caps, or the regular Bedouin head-dress. This Bedouin head-dress consists of a black, white, or bright-colored cloth a yard square, folded and laid on the head with a straight edge across the forehead, and bound round the head with a tightly rolled black stocking (to represent the black coil of hair rope used by the Bedouins), or with a gay cord. Zariseh's head-dress may be a figured or plain bright cloth wound under her chin or tied like a Red Cross nurse's head-dress. Sada may go bare-headed, or wear a scarf like Zariseh's. All may wear light tan stockings with no shoes if they prefer not to go barefoot; or "mules" (heelless bedroom slippers) may be worn. The clothing of Ibrahim, Yakob, and Jidry should be of varied colors.

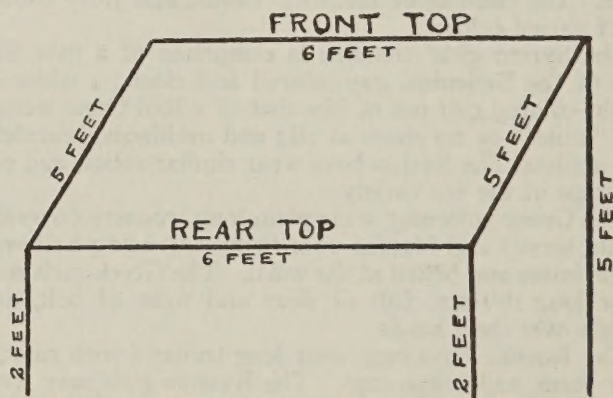
The Syrian girls' costume is comprised of a robe like that of the Bedouins, gay-colored and clean; a white or bright-colored coif put on like that of a Red Cross nurse; red "mules" or no shoes at all; and necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. The Syrian boys wear similar robes, and red felt caps of the fez variety.

The Greek boys may wear plain long trousers (overalls would serve) and blouses over them, extending half-way to the knees and belted at the waist. The Greek girls may wear long dresses, full of skirt and tight of belt, and shawls over their heads.

The Russian boys may wear long trousers with smocks over them, and rough caps. The Russian girls may wear full skirts, white blouses with bodices or small shoulder-shawls, and shawls over their heads.

A tan floor covering may be used to represent the desert (burlap, canvas, or a tan rug). If a back curtain is used, it may be of blue to simulate sky. A Bedouin

tent is to be represented by a large piece of black or dark brown cloth, raised on rough supports. If the play is to be given outdoors, poles may be easily thrust into the ground to form the framework, and if indoors, a simple frame can be nailed together (using two five-foot front posts set six feet apart and connected at the top with a six-foot piece of wood; two two-foot back posts set six feet apart and connected at the top with a six-foot piece of wood; and slanting five-foot pieces extending from the tops of the front posts to the tops of the back posts; thus forming a frame of lean-to effect). The tent cloth is stretched over this, reaching to the ground at the sides and back, and left open in front. If it should prove impossible to put up a frame, something can be devised from clothes-horses, or as a last resort, even a pair of chairs may be used as a support for the tent cloth, as the Bedouin tents are sometimes very low and small.



VIEW OF TENT FROM REAR

Inside the tent, which faces the front of the stage and is set back five feet or so from the front, a medley of articles should be scattered: a water-jar, an earthenware bowl, a wooden chopping-bowl, baskets, and a roll of quilts. A litter of dried grass, stubble, and brush (firewood is very scarce) in front of the tent will suggest a fire. It would be very effective to make a flour-mill of the kind used in Bible times and to this day, and if there are available boys taking cement work in school the making of a mill would be a simple matter. The two halves of a round cheese box could be used as a foundation (for the sake of lightness), a hole being left in the center of the upper one to slip over an iron bar extending upward from the center of the lower one, and a vertical handle being set near the edge of the top stone, for turning it round.

All the costumes and accessories described above may be elaborated or simplified according to the materials available; but their informative value will of course be much greater if they are kept as true to fact as possible.



## THE BLACK TENTS

*As the scene opens, Ibrahim and Yakob are to be seen in the foreground, playing Blind Man's Buff. Zariseh sits in the tent grinding at the mill or watching the boys. Sada runs out of the tent and between the two boys.*

**IBRAHIM:** (*Pulling the dark handkerchief from his eyes*) There are too many folks going to the Holy Sepulchre today. We're likely to get knocked down by a camel and hurt worse than that silly Sada. Here, you Sada, stop running so! If you tumble down, you'll be crying all night with your arm.

*Sada runs back to the tent, and crouches beside Zariseh. A Syrian boy and girl—more if desired—walk past, carrying unlighted candles. They stare at the Bedowin children as they pass.*

**IBRAHIM:** Where do you live, you boy?

**SYRIAN BOY:** Up yonder in Nazareth. Where do you?

**IBRAHIM:** (*Boastfully*) Me? I live from Damascus to the Persian Gulf—wherever it pleases us and our camels and sheep to wander.

**SYRIAN BOY:** (*Haughtily*) I am no wandering gipsy. My father's house is the finest on Nazareth's hills.

**IBRAHIM:** Ho! Who wants to be fastened to the ground like an olive tree? (*He chants loudly.*)

My house is a bundle I bear on my back;

Whenever night comes, I my bundle unpack!

*Syrian boy hurries off stage, as if to overtake companions.*

**YAKOB:** But why do they all carry candles in the daytime, Ibrahim?

ZARISEH : (*Eagerly coming forward*) This is the day they say the holy fire comes down and—

IBRAHIM : Who asked you, dog of a girl? (*Turns his back on her with a lordly air. She returns, shrinkingly, to the tent.*) What does a girl know about it? This is the day the fire comes down into their temple, Yakob; and they all want to light their candles by it. The dogs of Christians! Take care they don't touch you as they go by, or look at you with the evil eye.

*The Greeks enter, followed by the Russians, all with candles in their hands. They pass across the stage and out at the other side. The children huddle back near the tent and stare at them.*

YAKOB : What kind of people are those, Ibrahim?

IBRAHIM : You don't know any more than a goat, do you?

YAKOB : But—Ibrahim! Our father hadn't pitched his tents by the Jerusalem gates before—oh, not since I was as little as Sada, I guess.

IBRAHIM : (*Strutting a little*) And I, Ibrahim, have camped by Jerusalem and Nazareth and Bethlehem and Antioch and Damascus.

YAKOB : But I don't believe you know what those people were, yourself.

IBRAHIM : Of course I know! The first ones were Greek infidels, and the last were Russians. Crazy ones! They come miles upon miles upon miles from their own homelands to visit the Sepulchre they call holy.

YAKOB : Why do they call it holy?

IBRAHIM : Because they say their prophet, Jesus, was buried there. It's just the way we Moslems like to go to Mecca. But there's no use talking so much. Let's play something.

YAKOB : Leap-frog?

*Yakob gets down on his hands and knees and Ibrahim jumps over him and then saunters on disgustedly.*

IBRAHIM: No fun in that.

*Jidry enters from the right as they talk, stands on one foot, glances in their direction and away again.*

YAKOB: Want to play Pebble, Pebble, Who's Got the Pebble, then?

IBRAHIM: Great sport Kubby Mukhzinak would be, with only two of us to play!

YAKOB: Why don't we call that boy over there?

*They all turn and look at Jidry, the girls joining the two boys.*

YAKOB: I wonder who he is? It seems as if I'd seen him before.

ZARISEH: (*Timidly*) He looks a little bit like Jidry—that boy who camped near us one summer in the desert.

IBRAHIM: (*Laughing loudly*) If that isn't just like a girl—a stupid donkey of a girl! Did you ever see Jidry in fine clean clothes? More likely this is a sheikh's son. Jidry! Oho! Don't you remember Jidry's feet? They were worse than Sada's arm, even. They turned right in to say how-do-you-do to each other, and he could hardly walk without falling down. And this boy's legs are as straight as anybody's. Jidry! Jidry! (*He puts his hands on his hips and shakes with exaggerated laughter. As he says the name, the other boy smiles and comes toward them.*)

JIDRY: Did you call me? I thought it was you, but I was just trying to be sure of it. Hello, Ibrahim! 'Lo, YAKOB! 'Lo, Zariseh and Sada!

*The other children all retreat a little, and look him up and down in amazement.*

IBRAHIM: But you aren't Jidry. Jidry's clothes—

YAKOB: But you can't be Jidry. Jidry's feet—

JIDRY: But I am Jidry, all the same! (*He marches up and down in front of them, fingering his robe proudly.*)



IBRAHIM: (*Frightened*) Wh-hat happened? Were you magicked by the jinns?

JIDRY: No, I wasn't magicked. It's a long story.

*He sits down, cross-legged, and the others group themselves round him. Zariseh sits by Ibrahim, but he pinches her arm, and she steals over beside Jidry, who does not molest her. Sada leans against Zariseh's shoulder, holding her right arm with the other hand, as if it hurt.*

JIDRY: It was two years ago next fall, I think, that it all began. My father kept going south—and south—and south, to find good grazing for the sheep, and good wells, too. And by and by we met the foreign doctor from the mission hospital at Bahrein. I liked that foreign doctor as soon as my eyes rested on him; and he liked me. And he said I was the beginning of a fine man, and it would be too bad for me to go stumbling all my life. Well, and after a while he said if my father would take me down to the mission hospital they could give me a straight pair of legs. And they did!

YAKOB: How—how'd they do it? Did they cut them off and sew on new ones? How—where did they get the new ones?

JIDRY: (*Laughing*) My, no! These are my same old legs, made over like new. And I can tell you it took the doctors a good long time to get them mended. Why, they've only just finished with me now.

ZARISEH: And did it—hurt?

JIDRY: Ummm! It hurt all right enough! It hurt till I had to shut my teeth hard—like this—to keep from crying like a girl. But it was worth it, just to be in that clean white hospital place and have the good things to eat. Sometimes I did get tired of their soft white beds and wish I could be out on our desert with nothing all round me but sky; I guess all the desert people feel that way. But the good things to eat! Three dinners every

day! Melons and lettuce and onions and cauliflower and dates and honey and cheese and rice. And meat! Meat every—single—day!

*The others hold up their hands and look their amazement.*

IBRAHIM : I should think you'd be so fat you'd have to roll like a ball. Meat every day! We're glad enough to have it once a year, when one of the camels gets too old to work and is good for nothing but eating. Especially now, when my father's sheep have all died. But—meat every day! (*He shakes his head incredulously.*)

SADA : (*Wistfully*) I don't remember when we've had anything more than lebben and rice and dates. I can't think what the other things taste like.

JIDRY : And they were so kind. They didn't beat even the girls! And clean! Why, we washed all over, two or three times a week, even when there wasn't a speck of dirt on us.

IBRAHIM : (*Scornfully*) That's nothing but foolishness! *Zariseh spreads her brown, soiled hands, and looks at them wistfully.*

JIDRY : Yes, maybe it is; but you've no idea how good it makes you feel—all happy and singy. Clean clothes are fine, too. (*Strokes his robe.*) But it's going to be hard to keep clean when I get home again. It isn't easy on the desert, with the wells so few.

IBRAHIM : I wouldn't care a bit for that. But the meat—ummm! the meat.

JIDRY : Yes, and the reading and writing. They taught us to read and write.

YAKOB : Not you?

JIDRY : Yes, me! And to do numbers, too.

IBRAHIM : Why, even our father doesn't possess the magic of reading and writing! Not even the sheikh!

JIDRY : And they told us stories and taught us songs.

ZARISEH: I like songs. I know some, too. Here's one my mother used to sing to Yakob:<sup>1</sup>

Good morning now to you, Little Boy!

Your face is like the dew, Little Boy!

There never was a child so merry and so mild,

So good morning once again, Little Boy!

IBRAHIM: (*Bullyingly*) You must think we men have time to listen to silly girls. I'll tell my father to beat you, when he gets home, see if I don't.

ZARISEH: My father won't beat me hard. He likes me, even if I am a girl, my father does. When I had fever, down on the desert, my mother says he walked up and down in front of the tents and wouldn't sleep. He even wanted to carry me miles and miles to the Turkish doctor at Jidda; but the other men laughed at him for making such a fuss about a girl; so of course he didn't. But you see he really likes Sada and me—though of course not so well as the boys.

JIDRY: In the mission hospital they say that girls are as good as boys—or almost.

YAKOB: Well, that settles it! They certainly must have lost their wits! What kind of stories did they tell you? Any new ones?

JIDRY: Yes, new as new could be. One that I liked best was about the Good Shepherd. How he loves people just as if they were his own sheep. And the lambs are us children, and he carries us in his arms—the way shepherds always do, you know. And if one of them gets bad and does wicked things and wanders away from the right paths, the Good Shepherd goes after him and gets him, just as my father climbs down the steep mountain places to get a sheep that's lost. And then there was a song that went like this: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," (because the Shepherd

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<sup>1</sup> Any lullaby tune to which the words may be fitted would be effective.

takes me where there is food enough, you know). "He leadeth me beside the still waters—"

ZARISEH : (*Interrupting eagerly*) Just the way our father used to do! The poor sheep get so frightened when the streams are rough. They are afraid to drink unless he finds them a quiet place.

JIDRY : "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—"

ZARISEH : Oh, where the steep cliffs are! And the wolves!

JIDRY : "Through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." That's all I remember of that one.

IBRAHIM : It sounds all very fine, but I don't see what it means. Is the Good Shepherd—maybe—God? Allah? I never heard about Allah's taking such care as that.

JIDRY : No, I didn't, either, before I went to the hospital. But those people seem better acquainted with Him than we do. That's why they made my legs straight. Did any of our people care about my crooked feet? Do you suppose Mohammed cared about them? Of course not! But The-Lord-Is-My-Shepherd—He cared, and that's the reason the foreign doctors mended me.

IBRAHIM : But who is He? Who is He, that big shepherd that carries people like sheep?

JIDRY : They say—yes, and I know it's true—that He's Allah's own son—God's own Son. He's Jesus.

*At the name, Ibrahim springs to his feet and draws away from Jidry, and the others follow his example.*

IBRAHIM : (*Speaks loudly and rapidly*) There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his prophet! Besides, it's nonsense you're talking; Jesus has been dead for years and years. How could he be a shepherd now, and take care of people the way you said? Why, (*points in*



*the direction pilgrims took earlier*) all day since the rising of the sun Syrian infidels and others from beyond the sea have been running to his Sepulchre—his grave. I wonder you aren't there yourself, with a candle to light at the flame from heaven. Is your doctor there? He's a Christian, isn't he?

JIDRY: Yes, he's a Christian. He isn't there, though; he's looking after the sick people as he always does.

YAKOB: I thought all Christians went to the Sepulchre on Easter Eve.

JIDRY: Not all. I asked the doctor about that. He said that many of the Greek Christians, and the Russian, and the Syrian, made the pilgrimage. They come because their fathers did before them; yes, and their fathers' fathers, I guess. They think God is pleased with them for coming. And they think the flame will bring them happiness and good, if they can light their candles with it.

ZARISEH: And doesn't your doctor believe that, too?

JIDRY: No, my doctor says God likes it just as well if we stay right where we are and pray to Him; because, you see, He's everywhere. And besides, no one really knows that Jesus was buried where they have built the temple of the Sepulchre.

IBRAHIM: I say it's all nonsense you're talking.

JIDRY: It's hard to understand it all; but I believe it, for the hospital people said so, and they speak the truth. They say Jesus was dead and is alive again, and that He takes care of us when we ask Him to. He can, because He's God's own Son.

IBRAHIM: (*Still more angrily*) There is no God but God! Go away, you dog of an infidel! How dare you talk to good Moslems of the Christian God? Go, or we'll stone you from our tents!

*Jidry starts slowly away, and Ibrahim shakes his fist at him. Yakob imitates Ibrahim. Sada picks up a*

*little stick and throws it toward him, then holds her arm and cries with pain. Zariseh runs to her. Jidry, who has walked slowly away with hanging head, stops and looks back.*

ZARISEH: Oh, what shall I do? It's her poor little arm again.

*The brothers bend over her, but Sada pulls away and cries.*

JIDRY: What's the matter with her arm?

ZARISEH: There's something wrong with the way it fastens on her shoulder. She fell off a camel last summer, and the camel trod on her. And now she's wrenched it again.

JIDRY: (*Coming back and kneeling before the child*) Let's see, Little Sister. (*He handles the arm carefully.*) I think—I'm sure my doctor could fix it.

ZARISEH: Could he? Really? Our doctors cut it to see if it wouldn't straighten when it healed, but it only grew worse. See the scar? And they gave her nasty medicine. But it cost so much my father had to stop trying, though he said as soon as there was a chance to get a few more goats so he could pay, he would take her to another doctor and try again.

IBRAHIM: But if your doctor is beyond the desert--

JIDRY: He isn't! He isn't! He's in Jerusalem. He brought me with him.

IBRAHIM: (*Extending both hands, palms up, and shrugging his shoulders*) But we have told you we have nothing left to pay with. Doctors eat up a man's substance as the locusts eat a field, my father says. And this is only a girl—though she is little and cunning—

JIDRY: But my doctor is different. Lots of the people they cured at the hospital didn't have anything to pay at all. My doctor—you may be angry again—my doctor is a Jesus man.

ZARISEH: (*Confidently*) I don't believe they can be so very wicked after all, those Christian infidels. I know what my father will say when he comes home. He'll say, "Anyone is good who will make my baby girl well again." Let's ask him.

IBRAHIM: Don't let's wait for him to come. It is still early in the day and he may tarry till the evening. I think he has gone to the market just inside the nearest gate. We will go and seek him.

*Ibrahim, Yakob, and Jidry start toward the exit together, and Sada takes Zariseh's hand, urging her on after the boys.*

SADA: Hurry, Sister, hurry! Sada's arm hurts so hard!

IBRAHIM: (*Smiles back at her*) Never you mind, Sada! Jidry's doctor can mend it! You must keep thinking about the doctor—and about that big Good Shepherd!—And, Jidry, while we're looking for Father, maybe you could tell us—well, some more of those stories about The-Lord-Is-My-Shepherd.

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